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AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS HAVE always travelled. The country's proximity to nowhere in particular has given rise to several generations who were drawn to the bright lights of artistic hotspots across the oceans: first to Europe, then North America, and now, not surprisingly, many are honing their ideas and craft in China. The foreign creative community in Beijing is diverse and thriving with artists from all over the world—some attracted to the booming economy, some to the region's history, some keen to explore first-hand the morphing identity of a contemporary superpower. Celebrated artist and educator Jayne Dyer has been at the vanguard of Australian artists working in China for over 15 years. ARTIST PROFILE spoke to her in Beijing about her experiences and her upcoming exhibition in Melbourne.

How long have you been coming to China? What first attracted you to the place?

It was an exhibition of Australian artists in 1994 organised by Meridian Gallery in Melbourne and [Australian] Brian Wallace, director of Red Gate Gallery in Beijing. I came with the show and found the Beijing experience very different from other parts of Asia, Europe and South America—it was coded, confrontational, and electric. I returned to Australia and applied for an Asialink funded Beijing residency for 1996. That sealed my on-going connection.

You've said you stay because there is endless inspiration and endless possibility in the kind of work you can make in China. Can you explain what you mean by that?

The people you meet here are incredible. I like long friendships, but having the lifelong friend, the same person you see every day, has never really been the way I think. Here there are people who constantly come in and out of your life, coming to China

because they're visiting to do interesting things. For example, there is this guy I met recently who is studying the waterways of China—an American who is writing hugely important policy. He comes in, a group of us meet, he tells us what's going on in a way that you think "I would never otherwise know this in the detail I'm hearing this now". It was through some random place that we met; things like that just come in a continuing discussion.

I love that it's always varying; you don't plan anything. In Australia, you plan ahead to go out with the people you work with. Here, there's always just something new on tomorrow. If anything, just to stay in one night with a lettuce leaf is really a pleasure.

Also, Asia offers great opportunities to make major public and corporate commissions. I am a full-time practicing artist and am fortunate to receive funding by sales of work from my exhibitions in commercial galleries, grants, university residencies and so on. The regular commissions for high-end projects maintain my life and my ability to conceive and develop ambitious ideas and projects here.

I'm not and will never be a 'local', always an outsider looking in. In that sense, I'm anonymous, invisible, and, in the end, immaterial in the great economic expansion of new China. I exist in a place of slippage; it's a highly energised place to be for an artist who likes to observe and is attracted to dislocation and flux!

How do you find the art scene in Beijing?

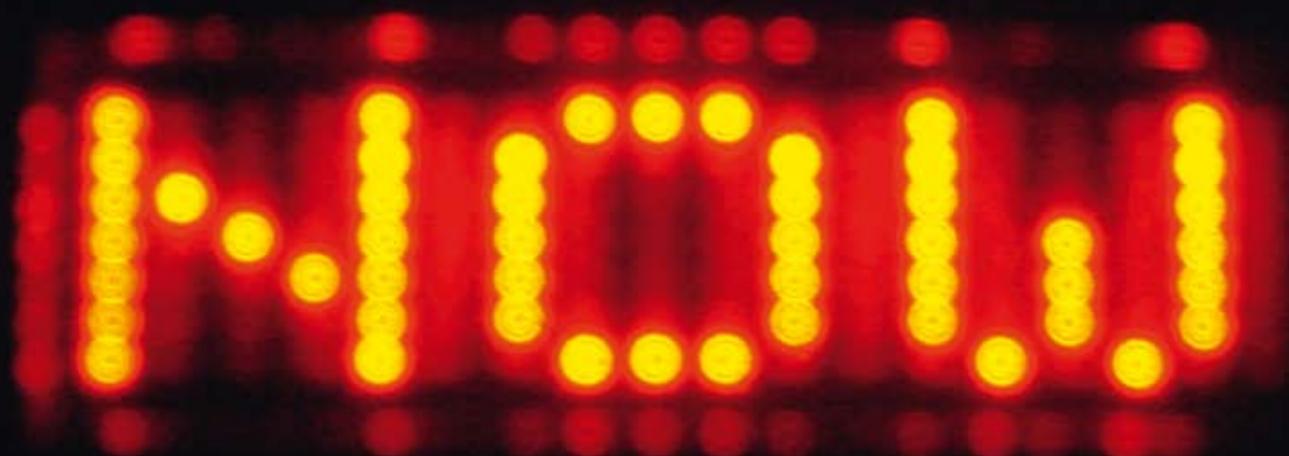
It is simultaneously huge and localised. It's all scale, scale, scale—exaggerated, commercial, cowboy, transitory and fragile. The market and art practice have undergone a revision with the post-2008 cool down. Narrative practice is still a strong presence but ecological and societal issues are replacing the post-revolution genre.

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JAYNE DYER

Story Paul Flynn

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You also spend considerable time in Taiwan—do you notice a difference from the mainland in the art being made?

To me Taiwan is intimate whereas China is distanced and filtered. Taiwanese, like Hong Kong artists, are extremely aware of the global popularity of mainland practice. Taiwanese are often self reflective, political, concerned with social diasporas and identity, influenced by US and Japanese manga and pop.

“ I thrive on working on installations that are site-specific. Only so much can be planned and mapped...decisions are often made and changed quickly. ”

You started as a painter but now work across a range of media—what comes first for you, the idea or the material?

The concept. I prefer the absence of the hand, the gesture—you could say I prefer the absence of the presence of the artist. I set up frameworks for participants to perform, or work with teams of assistants to install, such as my installations using books. I direct the overall scope but ask assistants to make critical, technical and visual decisions that affect results. I work with fabricators—carpenters, metal workers, light specialists—to realise ambitious ideas. Their skills and knowledge shape the outcome of each project. These strategies open opportunities for conversations, innovative solutions; they free up ownership and ego.

Many of your works reference knowledge and words—we see a lot of books, sometimes with text sometimes without. Where does this obsession come from? Are

you trying to say something about knowledge and communication?

Our reverence for the abstract notion of 'knowledge' is one of the great fallacies. Knowledge is relational, contextual; knowledge is not always transferable, it is not necessarily truth. Most cultures have a reverent relationship to books—whether public, private, social or religious, as receptacles of knowledge. I often use the loose proposition of the library to raise questions about intention and value; what is a fact and what may be a fiction is in the way we construct meaning. It all depends on who wrote the book.

I understand you're also keen for people to interact with your work, taking bits of your installations away with them. Why is that?

I thrive on working on installations that are site-specific. Only so much can be planned and mapped, there is a particular dynamic of energy and chance that occurs in the final install, decisions are often made and changed quickly. But I also like experiential participation and collaboration. My temporal work or site-specific installations are often made to quickly degrade and are usually sourced from local material easily recognised by the audience. I want works to offer physical opportunities for the audience to participate, and in doing so, actually change the work—helping to realise my ambition to present our world as a site of flux, impermanence and inevitable decay.

For installations I did in Korea and Taiwan last year, I invited the audience to sit, read and/or take a book with them (The Book Project – Spill: Korea, 2009; The Book Project – Spill: Taiwan, 2009). Earlier this year, a vagrant took up residence for three months in the abandoned house I used for the Fubon Art Foundation project (The Butterfly Effect: Taiwan, 2010). I had littered the space with detritus including clothes, furniture,





textbooks; the vagrant used a book as a pillow. Right now, I'm about to install 7000 butterflies in the Art Centre Bookstore of Chengchi University, Taipei, from October to December 2010. That installation is designed to gradually disappear as staff and students are asked to take part of it away with them each time they buy a book.

In your new exhibition, 'Talking in Tongues', we are presented with a series of words that could come from an intimate conversation between lovers—and yet you use neon, which is a very brash, imposing medium. What are you getting at with this? Can you explain this latest work and your choices behind it?

It's the perfect collision—intimate words handwritten in neon, the personal becomes a headline through neon, which is usually associated with public media. I like collapsing expected relationships, questioning assumptions—in this case, a dialogue about intimacy—and opening potential other readings and interpretations. Light itself is such a great metaphor for transience and transference.

I like to posit a question rather than provide an answer; this may involve re-jigging commonly held beliefs, putting familiar concerns or references together in unexpected ways to create a disjuncture. I am interested in the experiential engagement of the viewer.

And how did you make the work? Have you worked with neon before?

I made drawings and worked in Beijing with a neon company. It's my first but not last time with light!

This is also the first exhibition in which you have included images of yourself—how does that feel? Why now?

I tend to distance myself in my practice, as I mentioned before I like to keep the artist's hand out of sight. The body photographs—my hands holding LED text, a torch in my mouth and so on—are important intimate counterpoints to the cool neon. My body is mature; it has a history, adding a potential disjuncture to the neon conversation.

What ideas and people have influenced your work over the years to reach that maturity?

Where do I start? [Belgian artist] Francis Alys' notion of the nomad has an obvious resonance with me, as well as [British sculptor] Cornelia Parker's intelligence, but everything, everything, triggers my thinking and strategies. ■

Jayne Dyer is represented by Anna Pappas Gallery, Melbourne, King Street Gallery on William, Sydney, and China Art Projects, Beijing.

www.annapappasgallery.com
www.kingstreetgallery.com.au
www.chinaartprojects.net

EXHIBITION
 Jayne Dyer
 Talking in Tongues
 13 Oct – 13 Nov 2010
 Anna Pappas Gallery, Melbourne

- 01 **Now**, 2010, LED lights, dimensions variable
- 02 **Speak to me 2**, 2010, digital print on archival paper, 40 x 60cm
- 03 **Stutter 1**, 2006, newspapers and thread
- 04 **A Reading 3** 2008, digital image, 198 x 120cm, edition of 5
 A digital photograph that has been produced as an independent artwork from the installation *The Reading Room*, 2007. In the exhibition *Spare Room*, at Elizabeth Bay House Museum, Sydney. Site specific installation, 2000 books, 2 doorways
- 05 **Jayne Dyer**, photo
- 06 **Screaming**, 2010, neon
 Courtesy the artist and Anna Pappas Gallery, Melbourne